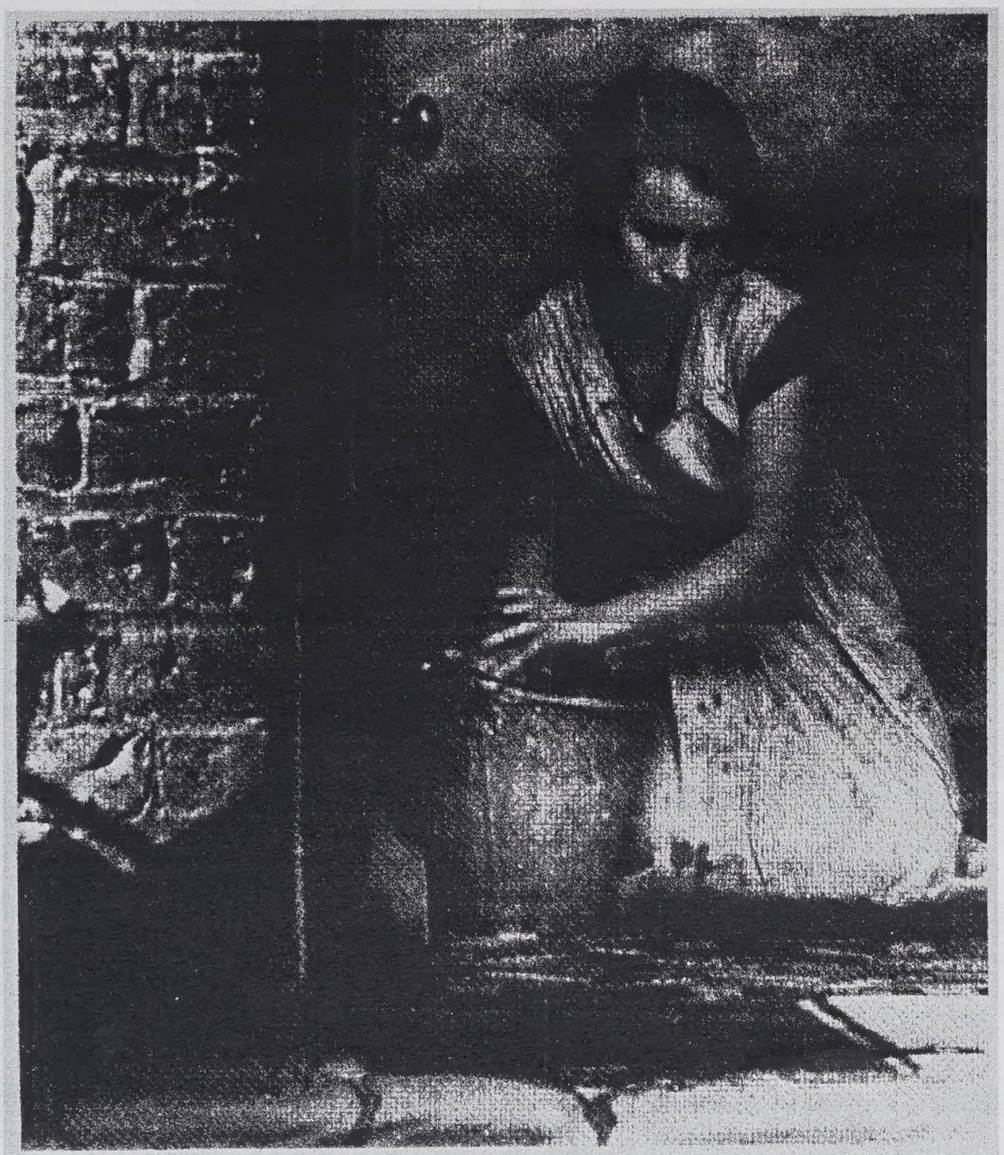
ART REVIEW

They Didn't Forget the Camera

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO



THE introductory wall panel for "Picture Perfect: Masterworks of Photography" at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich describes the exhibition as drawn from one of the world's finest collections of vintage photography in private hands. The museum is not gilding the lily here, for the Hochberg-Mattis Collection, from which these wonderful photographs are drawn, is probably the most comprehensive and important private collection of vintage photography in the United States.

Michael Mattis and his wife, Judith Hochberg, began collecting photographs in the early 1980's, initially as a hobby. They at first focused on 20th-century pictures, but soon sought photography from its inception in 1839. Nobody was terribly interested in vintage photographic material then, and they were able to acquire inexpensively numerous rare, even unique, early photographs and prints from across the world.

Today vintage photography is a sort of museum obsession. The Metropolitan Museum of Art currently has a retrospective of the work of the pioneering 19th-century Scottish photographer Roger Fenton, while the early American photographic pioneers Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes are the subject of an exhaustive exhibition at the International Center of Photography. The National Gallery of Art in Washington has a show of the work of the American Irving Penn.

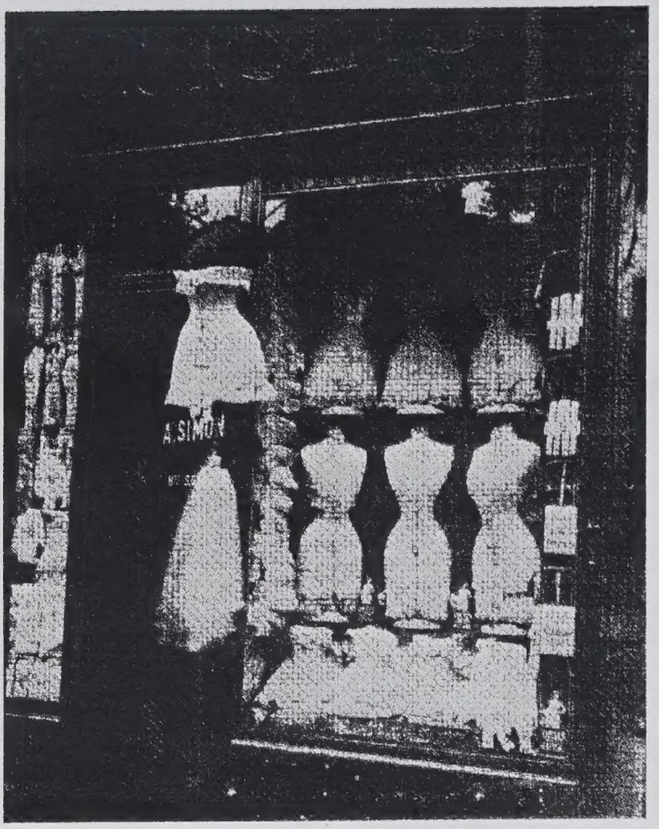
The exhibition at the Bruce presents a broad cross section of works from the Hochberg-Mattis collection, which contains thousands of photographs. The works are displayed chronologically, beginning with exceptional examples of early French, English and American images. Highlights of this period on display include two 1842 images by William Henry Fox Talbot,a co-inventor of photography, and some rare, valuable French daguerreotypes.

When I first saw this show, I spent an hour in these opening rooms. There are so many images of quality and historical importance on display, from Charles Nègre's proto-art photograph of a geometric puzzle of buildings at Grasse, France, in 1852, to one of Gustave Le Gray's 1850's seascapes. Le Gray, as students of photography history know, was the first to capture clouds.

Seeing the exhibition again a couple of weeks later helped me appreciate the impressive range of photographic techniques and processes represented. They include cyanotypes, daguerreotypes, salted paper prints from calotype and waxed-paper negatives, albumen prints, platinum prints and the perhaps more-familiar, but now also obsolete, gelatin silver prints.

The show also includes 19th-century travel photography. The American John Hillers's picture of a wedge-shaped rock formation in the Grand Canyon is spellbinding, as is the English Captain John Murray's 1850's waxed paper negative of the Taj Mahal. Looking at these photographs, you feel as if you are traveling with the explorer-artists.

Then there is Carleton Watkins's "Domes from Sentinel Dome" (1866), a masterpiece of 19th-century landscape photography depicting bulbous rock formations high in Yosemite National Park. Watkins is largely forgotten today, but he was the Ansel Adams of 19th-century photography. His career sadly nose-dived after he went bankrupt and sold his life's output of glass negatives to a rival photographer who, the wall text tells us, published them under his own imprint.



At the Bruce: left, Bill Brandt's "Young Housewife," 1937; top, Eugène Atget, "Boulevard de Strassbourg," 1911; and Dorothea Lange's "Migratory Cotton Picker," 1940.

Had the show ended here, I suspect few viewers would have had complaints. But there are another two rooms filled with early modern and recent images, ranging from the work of modernists like André Kertész, Tina Modotti, Alfred Stieglitz and Man Ray, to artists of the late 20th century like Robert Mapplethorpe and Diane Arbus. There is more than enough here to carry you away.

There is also quite a bit that shocks and disturbs. How are we to digest Nick Ut's devastating Pulitzer-winning photograph of a naked Vietnamese girl screaming as napalm from a dropped bomb burns her flesh? And what about the Russian photojournalist Yevgeny Khaldei's shot of jubilant Red Army soldiers planting a flag over the Reichstag in Berlin in 1945? A new, cold war was about to begin.

Curated exhibitions tend to build on certain themes, and sub-themes, with works playing and feeding off one another. But this is a collection show, with the works selected on their merits and arranged chronologically. The result is a sweeping fisheye view of photography's history, extending and receding in unexpected ways. I love every bit of it.

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"Picture Perfect: Masterworks of Photography" is at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, 1 Museum Drive, Greenwich, through Sept. 11. Information: (203) 869 6786.